

Message Text

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SUBJECT: MALTESE PARLIAMENT ARGUES ABOUT THREATS TO
FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

REF: VALLETTA 0101

1. ON FEBRUARY 4, DURING A PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE OVER A NEW GOM PLAN TO ENCOURAGE THE REPATRIATION OF PRIVATE MALTESE CAPITAL INVESTED ABROAD (REFTEL), REPRESENTATIVES OF THE LABOR AND NATIONALIST PARTIES WOUND UP IN A DONNYBROOK OVER PRESS FREEDOM. ALTHOUGH PECULIARLY MALTESE IN ITS IMPACT AND DENOUEMENT, THE INCIDENT COULD HAVE BROADER SIGNIFICANCE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE CURRENT POLITICAL CAMPAIGN. INDEED, IT IS LARGELY BECAUSE OF THE RISING POLITICAL TEMPERATURE IN MALTA THAT THE INCIDENT WENT AS FAR AS IT DID.

2. DURING THE DEBATE, LABOR FINANCE MINISTER JOSEPH ABELA TOOK CONSIDERABLE UMBRAGE AT CRITICAL ARTICLES ON HIS CAPITAL REPATRIATION SCHEME WHICH HAD APPEARED IN
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A CONSERVATIVE, ENGLISH LANGUAGE DAILY NEWSPAPER,

THE TIMES OF MALTA. ALTHOUGH OFFICIALLY INDEPENDENT, THIS NEWSPAPER IS CONSISTENTLY ACCUSED (RIGHTLY SO) BY THE LABORITES AS BEING PRO-NATIONALIST AND ANTI-MINTOFF IN ITS EDITORIAL POLICIES.

3. IN THIS INSTANCE, MINISTER ABELA ACCUSED THE TIMES OF ATTEMPTING TO PUT THE LABOR GOVERNMENT IN A BAD LIGHT BY ITS CLAIM THAT THE GOM WOULD MAKE A PROFIT ON THE REPATRIATION SCHEME, TO THE DETRIMENT OF THE MALTESE INVESTORS. ABELA ADDED THAT HE HELD THE EDITOR RESPONSIBLE FOR SUCH UNJUSTIFIED AND DELIBERATE ATTEMPTS TO HARM THE GOVERNMENT. HE HAD THEREFORE ASKED THE ATTORNEY GENERAL TO SEE IF THERE WERE GROUNDS FOR LEGAL ACTION AGAINST THE TIMES.

4. AT THIS POINT, PRIME MINISTER MINTOFF SHARPLY AND ANGRILY INTERJECTED THAT "THE GOVERNMENT COULD NO LONGER BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SAFETY OF THESE PEOPLE (THE TIMES STAFF) IF THEY CONTINUED TO PROVOKE THE MALTESE PEOPLE (IN SUCH A MANNER)."

5. IN RESPONSE, NATIONALIST DEPUTY LEADER VINCENT TABONE ASKED PRIME MINISTER MINTOFF IF HIS COMMENT COULD NOT BE CONSTRUED AS A "THREAT TO THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS." (COMMENT: MINTOFF, IN ADDITION TO BEING PRIME MINISTER, ALSO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR INTERNAL SECURITY AND THE POLICE, AND THEREFORE IS THE GUARANTOR OF PRESS FREEDOM.)

6. BEFORE MINTOFF COULD REPLY, THE SPEAKER RULED DR. TABONE OUT OF ORDER AND DEMANDED THAT TABONE WITHDRAW HIS QUESTION AS "IT IMPUTED BAD MOTIVES." WHEN TABONE REFUSED TO DO SO, THE SPEAKER (AN EX-ALBOR MP, WHO WAS GIVEN HIS PRESENT POSITION BY MINTOFF) ORDERED THAT TABONE BE "NAMED," AND THEN SUSPENDED TABONE FROM ATTENDING PARLIAMENTARY SESSIONS FOR A WEEK. FOLLOWING THIS, NATIONALIST LIORGIO BORG OLIVIER MOVED A FUTILE VOTE OF NO CONFIDENCE IN THE GOVERNMENT, AND THE OPPOSITION MPS WALKED OUT IN PROTEST.

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7. IN A PARTING SHOT, THE SPEAKER ALSO ORDERED THE PRESS REPRESENTATIVES IN ATTENDANCE NOT EVEN TO PRINT THE "QUESTION" WHICH DR. TABONE HAD ASKED (ON PAIN OF BEING CHARGED WITH CONTEMPT BY PARLIAMENT - A STEP WHICH HAPPENS ONLY TOO FREQUENTLY IN MALTA). AND SO ENDED THE WEEK IN THE MALTESE PARLIAMENT.

8. COMMENT: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS DUSTUP LIES IN ITS INDICATION OF HOW SHORT TEMPERERS HAVE BECOME, AND HOW THIN ARE THE SKINS OF THE LABOR PARLIAMENTARIANS AS THEY HEAD FOR THE SHOWDOWN AT THE POLLING BOOTHS LATER THIS YEAR. THEY ARE QUICK TO FIND FAULT, AND TAKE OFFENSE, AT ANY SUGGESTIONS OF CRITICISM IN THOSE SECTORS OF THE MALTESE PRESS WHICH DO NOT SHARE THE LABOR PARTY'S ADULATION OF DOM MINTOFF. THIS IS NOT THE FIRST, NOR WILL IT BE THE LAST, SUCH INCIDENT. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE EXTREME NERVOUSNESS BEING DISPLAYED BY THE LABOR PARLIAMENTARIANS DURING SUCH INCIDENTS SEEMS TO BELIE THEIR PUBLIC CLAIMS OF FIRM CONFIDENCE AT THE OUTCOME OF THE FORTHCOMING ELECTION. AND, OF COURSE, THE NATIONALISTS REVEL IN THE ROLE OF DEFENDER OF A FREE PRESS, ESPECIALLY WHEN HANDED SUCH AN OPEN OPPORTUNITY, AS IN THIS CASE. SMITH

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